Rift Valley fever is a zoonosis. It is a contagious disease which is also spread by mosquitoes. The disease affects mainly cattle, sheep and goats and because of its serious nature, it is controlled by the State.

Occurrence of the disease

- The disease is particularly widespread in late summer.
- In warm, moist conditions mosquitoes breed in stagnant water in low-lying areas such as vleis, rivers, dams and pans. Good rains followed by hot, sunny days promote the breeding of large numbers of mosquitoes which can then become carriers of the disease. Because of similar symptoms the disease can be confused easily with Wesselsbron disease (consult a veterinarian).
- Infected milk may be another source of infection.
- The disease may also be a metazoonosis in the case of infected mosquitoes spreading the infection to humans.
- The virus enters the body through the mucous membranes or minor skin lesions.

Who is at risk?

- In human cases there is frequently a history of close contact with sick animals or those that have aborted. People may be infected by direct contact, eg. veterinarians when carrying out postmortem examinations on animals which have died of the disease.
- Abattoir workers are particularly at risk of contracting the disease in the normal course of their duties.

**Symptoms**

*Animals*

- In hoofed animals abortions and inflammation of the liver are typical symptoms.
- There is also a high mortality rate in newly born and young lambs. Some lambs may die within 12 hours.
- Lambs may have a fever, show trembling and a bloody diarrhoea.
- In adult sheep symptoms may include fever, loss of appetite, a nasal discharge, diarrhoea, weakness, an unsteady gait and jaundice.

*Man*

- The first symptoms appear 3 to 7 days after infection.
- People get inflammation of the liver and spontaneous haemorrhaging may occur.
- The symptoms are similar to those of influenza: fever and pain in the muscles, back and joints. The eyes are also affected. In rare cases, meningitis may occur.

**Prevention and control**

- Cattle, sheep and goats should be immunised regularly against the disease. This will protect the animals as well as the people coming into contact with these animals.
- Control of the disease is based mainly on preventive immunisation which affords lifelong immunity. The vaccine used in pregnant animals and in cattle has to be given annually.
- After the initial immunisation of all animals only the lamb crop has to be immunised in the following years.
• Lambs born from ewes that have already been vaccinated should not be vaccinated before they are 5 to 6 months old. These lambs have a passive immunity via the colostrum from the mother. Pregnant ewes should also not be immunised with the live vaccine.

• Protective clothing must always be worn when carrying out postmortem examinations.

• Milk can be made safe for human consumption by pasteurisation or other forms of heat processing.

• Control of mosquitoes may be expensive but can be a valuable control measure to limit the incidence of the disease under very special circumstances only.